DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 801 PS 019 544

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TITLE The Young Child's Need for Death Education.
PUB DATE 4 Apr 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Death; *Educational Practices; Guidelines; Preschool Education; *Preschool Teachers; *Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods; *Young Children

ABSTRACT

Children are capable of handling the subject of death but the preschooler has more difficulty than others, and requires more time to resolve a loss. A teacher can help by responding in a supportive way. The teacher's difficulty is that a death almost always comes as a surprise which means that the teacher must work through the crisis for herself at the same time that she is trying to help her students. There are at least three plans of action a teacher can take when death occurs: (1) refuse to deal with the event; (2) integrate the topic of death into the curriculum; and (3) respond incidentally to the event and topic of death as they arise. With the latter situation, teachers should have prepared in advance clear objectives and carefully considered intructional strategies. When they teach about death, teachers can provide emotional support for children by listening to their concerns, feelings, and fears about death; by providing correct, factual answers to students' questions about death; and by helping students identify myths and erroneous information on the topic. (17 references) (RH)

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THE YOUNG CHILD'S NEED FOR DEATH EDUCATION

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Presentation for the Annual Meeting

American Educational Research Association

Chicago, IL

April 4,1991

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Mary E. Haas

On Friday evening there is a sitcom called FULL HOUSE which is made delightful because of the youngest child's comments as she encounters life's situations. In a recent episode little Michelle received her first pet, a fish. Her Uncle Joey explained to her the responsibilities of being a pet owner. Feeding the fish every day in a particular way and keeping the fish clean. After the commercial the scene shifts to the bathroom with a tub filled with bubbles and Uncle Joey saying "Michelle, you know that you are not to take a bath by yourself."

"I'm not alone. I'm with Fishy," Michelle replies.

Joey retrieves the fish and places it back into its bowl, but it is dead. Michelle asks why the fish is lying on it side.

Joey quickly says, "Fishy is tired after his bath and is sleeping."

Michelle returns to her room with the fish, and Joey confronts the other adults in the household with the problem. They agree that they must explain the truth to Michelle and arrive in her room to hear.

"Fishy you sure are tired when are you going to wake-up?"

After several awkward attempts to tell Michelle the truth, Michelle hears that the fish won't wake up because it is dead. Michelle says, "I killed him!"

She refuses to accept the explanation of an accident and Uncle Joey's attempt to take the blame for not having explained

how to clean a fish. When they try to interest her in a new aquarium with several fish, she refuses to show any interest. When she walks past the aquarium, she says. "Don't worry, fish I'm just passing through. I won't kill you."

Well, true to the half-hour TV schedule, Michelle's guilt feelings and fears are resolved before the end of the program and Michelle proudly announces, "I did good!"

This story illustrates several important point concerning young children and their learning and understanding of death. Young children interpret things in their own way and often don't understand adults when they speak clearly and certainly not when they speak in metaphor as they frequently do about death. Children think in clear categories and assume absolute guilt and believe that they will automatically repeat this behavior. Children can be helped thorough their misconceptions and misunderstandings. Children can overcome grief, but younger children require longer than the two years that is given as a guideline for adults.

Changes in life-span and life-styles of Americans have separated many, but not all, of the young from encountering death during their youth. All children learn of death through the media. The media's curriculum is a one-way curriculum with negative messages. Often these fragmented messages are internalized and interpreted alone with little or no help from a concerned adult.

Those who plan to become teachers believe that they will be teaching such traditional subjects as reading, history, and mathematics. However, it does not take long for the teacher to

realize that there are other things that enter into the curriculum which they as teachers feel unprepared to teach.

Research Findings and Interpretations

Because many young children said they did not know any old people and rarely see their grandparents, Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper and Serock (1976), concluded that parents, teachers, and policy makers should be concerned about the extent of age segregation in our society. The children they interviewed did not want to get old themselves, but the youngest children were most negative about the prospect of growing old. "I don't want to die," was the typical response to the question "How do you feel about getting old?" "You have a better chance of not dying if you're brand new," reasoned one four year old.

Young children are curious and ask questions such as: "Grandma, are you going to die soon?" "What will happen to me when I die?" "Can the bird come back to life?" Maurer (1974) suggests that questions such as these are a natural outgrowth of the child's need to know and an attempt to determine the life span of a human. If you were the grandmother surprised by the child asking you if you were going to die, would you reply, "Goodness, I hope not!" How do you think a child would interpret such a response?

Empirical research on the topic of death and children is extremely limited because of the sensitivity of the topic. The

research that has been done is interpreted in three theoretical frameworks reflecting the views of the researchers.

Social learning theorists believe that children learn from elements in their environments. Mitchell (1967) points out that various stimuli might hasten a child's awareness of death. The television and print media are two she particularly mentions. Television has been criticized for its treatment of death and the linkage of death to violence and to the lack of realistic emotions and feelings by numerous critics. Children's books dealing with death vary in their quality. Davis (1986) in a content analysis of 57 books with death themes concludes that since 1965 books for young children have a greater focus on death-related experiences, but are limited to death and the reactions of people to death. He concludes that while books since 1965 are more realistic than those published earlier, many of the books grossly distort and misrepresent the experiences of dying and grieving.

The direct life experiences of children have changed over the years. Advocates for the study of death by children whether it be in the home, church, or school, claim that children are no longer exposed to death at an early age because of advances in medicine. However, some social and economic groups do have a much higher death rate among their members including the young. There are variations in the acceptance of discussions about death. Upper-middle class students and urban students were examined by Balkin, Epstein, and Bush (1976). They conclude that the urban student did not want the discussion of death because they believed the discussion would encourage unwanted emotions to surface and that bad things would happen as a result. While the upper-middle

class students are more inclined to believe that discussions of death are appropriate.

Children do ask questions about death and interpret the answers they receive. Kastenbaum (1967) suggests that children tend to learn that people die under certain conditions. Death may be accidental or occurs because one is very old. "The equally significant corollary assumption is that the child himself will not die. He is not very sick, he is not old, and he does not intend to become very sick or very old" (Kastenbaum, 1967, p. 100). Therefore, most children see death as a long way off.

Using a psychoanalytic framework for his explanation Rochlin (1967) suggests that the lack of finality of death may be explained by denial on the part of the child. According to Rochlin, there is no doubt that the young child learns rapidly that death means the absence of life. Despite this recognition, there is apparently no pragmatic or philosophic acceptance on the part of the child. In observing the "death play" of children. He confirms that planes crash with no apparent damage to the victims. He concludes that "death play" serves an important denial function. Apparently, children realize, at a very early age, that death is inevitable, but very well developed defense mechanisms are functioning to defend oneself against the realization that life will end.

Nursery school teachers are quite familiar with young children's play around the topic of death. Many teachers noted an increase in death play at the time of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Kennedy. Violent television cartoons

and other presentations also seem to serve as substitutes for death play, indicating that the child needs a vehicle for working out and through destructive and disturbing thoughts about death.

Those researchers who use the cognitive-developmental theory to interpret their findings have identified patterns which they call stages or sequences in a child's understanding of death. Preschool children do not find death as final and inevitable. Nagy (1959) She also indicates that irrespective of the child's age, death is viewed as a negative and unpleasant prospect. Formanek (1974) found that children at the most immature level, are unable to respond to probes about death. At the next stage, children give partial explanations based on information that they gather from here and there. Koocher (1973) notes that young children produce concrete or egocentric responses to questions about death which included fantasy reasoning and magical thinking. Childers and Wimmer (1971) demonstrate a moderate relationship between increasing age and acceptance of the universality of death.

Several cognitive developmentalists suggest that a lack of acceptance of death on the part of the young child does not mean that children have no disagreeable sentiments concerning death. According to Nagy, the most painful thing about death may be the separation idea itself. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) have documented death discoveries in children under two year of age which were registered at an emotional depth that previous researchers thought impossible for such a young child. Galper (1978) suggests that the young child may well tie together aging and death in an unattractive package. She reports that the children in her study who were the most concerned about death were

also the most negative about their own aging and the elderly. Galper goes on to speculates that the child with such a reaction may seek to avoid older persons as a way of avoiding stimuli associated with death.

Five major conclusions emerge from the research concerning children and death.

1. Children do know about death. Evidence indicates that the primary existence of death is available to the child as early as 2 or 3 years of age.
2. Qualitative changes occur in the child's thinking about death as the child develops.
3. Psychoanalytic theory tells of denial and the apparent need of young children to deny that they will die as an explanation for a young child's inability to recognize death as final. Denial may also be a strong defense mechanism for all ages.
4. Young chidrens' ideas about death may be a reflection of learning from environmental influences such as socio-economic class, media encounters, and parental explanations. Therefore, children within a single classroom from homes with various life-styles may respond quite differently from one another to the topic of death.
5. All children view death as a negative and unpleasant prospect.

Rationale for Teaching about Death in the Schools

Educators asks students to identify patterns in their lives and to examine natural human activities and feelings. We also expect students to begin to analyze and develop their values with an emphasis on human dignity. Keeping these ideas in mind, the rationale for approaching the topic death with young children becomes obvious.

All citizens need to learn to understand their roles in society. A logical place for the child to begin is with the concept of the life cycle which includes growth, change, and death. As four year old Michael says to his daycare teacher, "there is always a beginning and an ending, and things happen in between." As children mature they need to become more aware of what they realistically can look forward to during their lifetimes. The child does this through observation and modeling the behaviors of elders and through interacting with peers and adults.

In a lifetime people encounter many highs: accomplishments, recognitions, and new beginnings. Educators give much reinforcement and recognition to these positive experiences. But people's lives also include many lows: difficulties, disappointments, tragedies, and endings. Unfortunately, both adults and schools frequently neglect to give any positive support to help children face these negative situations. By avoiding these lows the curriculum given to children becomes one that fails to educate the whole person. In avoiding helping children through the low points of life, many children are left to educate themselves with a catch-as-catch-can curriculum. Parents and teachers usually avoid the subject. It is often difficult or

impossible for young parents who encounter a tragedy to help children effectively. Teachers believe that they are to teach reading, history, and mathematics. They may come to realize that there are other things that enter into the curriculum which they deal with and may be unprepared to teach or may not want to teach.

The Primary Teachers and Death Education

All teachers, but particularly the primary teachers perform several roles as they go about their daily tasks with children. Children observe, imitate, and learn from their teachers at all times during the day. Primary teachers also do much more individualized teaching and talk more with individual students. Very young children share and talk about things that older students will not mention. Primary teachers hear statements that reveal a child's fears and confusion. They must be able to respond in a supportive way and recognize if a child might benefit from the skills of other trained professional in the schools or child care services.

There are at least three plans of action that you as a teacher can take. A teacher may refuse to deal with the topic of death with the children. Refusing to deal with the topic does send a message that the students will understand in their unique ways and interpret by themselves. An important question for these teachers is can you consider the refusal to deal with the topic of death an appropriate response given your educational goals and philosophy? Another approach is the "teachable moment" or dealing with the topic as an integral part of the curriculum, and

still another is to deal with the topic when the opportunity arises because of a death or when the topic arises naturally from a student comment. With either approach a teacher must be prepared. That preparation includes at a minimum clear objectives and carefully, thought through, instructional strategies.

As we have previously seen the topic death is emotionally charged topics for both children and teachers. This is not altogether bad nor does it mean that the topic should be either taught or avoided for this reason. It does mean, however, that the atmosphere in which death is studied needs to be one of high standards in knowledge and respect for individuals and human dignity. This respect must be afforded to the subject being studied, the students doing the learning, and the teacher. The teacher carries a big load of responsibility and should first think about her ability to feel comfortable in teaching about death. If the teacher is personally comfortable, then she can do a better job in the tasks of teaching and classroom management associated with the lessons.

Goals which are appropriate when teaching young children about death include:

1. Provide emotional support for children by listening to their concerns, feelings, and fears about death.
2. Provide correct factual answers to students' questions about death.
3. Help students identify myths and erroneous information about death.

4. Help students to learn that all living things die as part of the life cycle.

5. Promote students' respect for human dignity as an important value for all age groups and our responses to those who have lived before us.

6. Provide opportunities for students to build skills in listening, self-expression, empathy, and valuing.

These goals can be accomplished through different means. The teacher may plan units and lessons designed specifically to teach death. Another approach is for the teacher to examine the present curriculum and integrate ideas about death where appropriate opportunities are available. Still a third method is to use the teachable moment approach.

Summary

The subject of death is difficult for all ages and people to handle. Children are capable of handling this subject, however, the pre-schooler has more difficulty and requires more time to resolve the loss. The difficult thing for teachers is that a death will almost always come as a surprise which means that the teacher will need to work through the crises for herself as well as try to assist her students. Parents, too, have the same problem and often a young child comes to the teacher because the parent is unable to help them or the child needs additional reassurance from another adult whom they trust.

The children we teach, the parents of our students, and our teaching colleagues may die. The statistical probability of

facing a situation where you must deal with a death of a young person is already greater than most expect. "In a school system of 6000 students approximately 4 students per year will die and 40 will experience the death of a parent." (Smith-Martenz, et al page 6) Leukemia, cancer, cystic fibrosis, muscular distrophy, and AIDS are all terminal illnesses which some children have. AIDS will kill an increasing number of school age children because there has already been an increase in the number of children born with the HIV virus.

Two excellent articles specifically for teachers are "Death in My Classroom?" by Cathleen Postel and "An Unexpected Lesson" by Laurie Knowlton. Both of these teachers found themselves in a sad classroom situation for which they had not been prepared. The learned in the school of hard knocks how to deal with the situation and have shared their experiences. Surely those who are concerned with the health, mental and emotional development of young children should also share their knowledge. They should seek greater understanding of young children's ideas about death. Teacher trainers should be made aware of the role that they can play in alerting teachers and future teachers to the important roles they have in helping children to understand death.

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